

## Why Leo Tolstoy Wouldn't Super Size It

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In 1892 Leo Tolstoy published an article titled *The First Step*.<sup>1</sup> Originally written as the Preface to the Russian translation of *The Ethics of Diet* by Howard Williams it was published after his conversion to vegetarianism in 1889. While he wrote this article Tolstoy was concerned with the process towards righteousness. The steps to this goal consisted of many demanding rules of an ascetic lifestyle that included vegetarianism. Additionally, he also believed that many Russians misinterpreted Christianity and the adherents of this religion preferred “beefsteaks” to any enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> Food that tastes good incites other sensual thoughts, according to Tolstoy, making completion of any subsequent steps towards a good life unattainable.

Not only does he condemn eating meat, Tolstoy also uses this article to lament the popularity of augmenting meals. For instance, he prohibits the use of any sauces, spices or flowers while eating meals. This restriction is not based on health reasons. Like his source of inspiration Arthur Schopenhauer, these choices are grounded on moral imperatives rooted in abstract spirituality, especially Vedanta. In *The First Step* Tolstoy says “the satisfaction of a need has limits, but

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Tolstoy: *Essays and Letters*. New York: H. Frowde, 1909, pp. 84

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ivu.org/history/tolstoy/step.html>

pleasure has none.<sup>3</sup>” Food, as he sees it, is a basic need for humans, and all living things for that matter. However, we enjoy the process more than any other living creature. He advises readers to avoid the seduction numerous pleasures of the palate await us.

While some people may dispute whether flavorings on bread constitute the arousal of desire, Tolstoy would assert that it is an example of “relaxing effort” towards a righteous life. His writing in this article encourages personal sacrifice, and this includes abandoning all material “amenities” such as pillows, sheets, cushions or anything else he considered unnecessary.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, his sex life presents a complicated, often paradoxical picture.

When people live in luxury, Tolstoy says, they quickly become self-absorbed. Their egocentric lives then neglect the sacrificial life of others, such as artists. By indulging in life’s finer things we dull our senses. Too much pâté ruins a palette, and more than enough great symphonies can turn an ear deaf.

The fundamental tenet of most ascetic philosophies—including Tolstoy’s—is best described as an emphasis on person suffering. In today’s Western world, for some people this may mean an internet and cable connection is down for a day. Others struggle to procure food for themselves. Observances of vratas (vows of austerity) are required for Vedic students. These include fasting, prolonged silence, sleeping on the ground, isolation in the forest and observance of chastity. These vows last a year, though sometimes longer, (depending on the interpretation), and are

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<sup>3</sup> Leo Tolstoy: *Essays and Letters*. New York: H. Frowde, 1909, pp. 89

<sup>4</sup> Leo Tolstoy: *Essays and Letters*. New York: H. Frowde, 1909, pp. 91

found in most Vedanta text. Schopenhauer noted them frequently in *Will and the World as Representation*.<sup>5</sup>

While it is admirable that he concerned himself with altruism, one cannot help wondering if Tolstoy became a zealot while striving towards the good life. And I use that term in a good sense. *The First Step* was an article that served more as an introduction into the ascetic world Tolstoy entered than anything else. However, it can be viewed as one of the most important pieces of literature in the vegetarianism movement. The article describes gruesome scenes in slaughterhouses and asks readers how it is acceptable they can accept these conditions.

Moreover, Tolstoy dedicated copious time towards his goal, one that people from all academic disciplines should admire. Theologians, philosophers, writers among others have been influenced by Count Leo Tolstoy's writings. In *The First Step* he hoped readers would understand righteousness can be attained only by gradual steps, though a linear sequence of personal sacrifices. These sacrifices begin with one of our basic needs, food.

Readers: never doubt, he'd never want fries with that.

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<sup>5</sup> Schopenhauer's influence on Tolstoy is evident in Tolstoy's Letter to A.A. Fet, August 30, 1869 where he states he experienced "rapture" over the philosopher's work.